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ABSTRACT

A study examined the listening needs experienced by people who engage regularly in small group communication situations. Subjects were 137 students, including graduate communication students, senior level students in organizational communication classes, undergraduate communication students in an adult re-entry program, and undergraduate students in an honors introductory communication class. Subjects completed a two-item questionnaire concerning the difficulties they encountered in listening to someone and the most frequently occurring reasons why it seemed difficult to listen in the small group environment. Responses were analyzed using the content analysis method. Results indicated that three problem categories reflected a high level of need for effective listening as viewed or perceived by subjects. The categories were: (1) "message," specifically "rambling"; (2) delivery of the message (overall delivery and monotone speaking); and (3) the speaker's negative attitude. Suggestions (drawn from the body of listening research and practical experience) for ways to improve listening in the organizational environment specifically address the three problem categories. Findings suggest that the nature of listening problems in the small group situation are only somewhat different and unique from listening problems generally, and that there is a fundamental responsibility of all members of a small group to listen attentively and to explain their positions. (RS)

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Listening Strategies and Behavior for Participants in Small Group Processes: A Need Based Prescription

by

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Numerous communication and listening scholars have approached the question of how listening behavior should be improved. As early as the 1930's textbooks were offering help for those who wished to listen better. The work of Nichols (1957), Steil (1983), Wolvin and Coakley (1988) and a host of others has contributed to a substabtial body of material which offers all sorts of help for those who wish to improve their listening.

Many of the scholars have addressed listening in general or perhaps in general in the organizational environment. Most of the specific communication situation based suggestions fall into one of two categoriies: listening to a speaker to a large group; or, listening as a part of an interpersonal dyadic interaction. In all of the scholarship and research provided thusfar, very little, if any, has addressed listening in the small group environment.

The small group situation is perhaps one of the most frequently occuring situations in which people find themselves communicating, especially in the organizational environment. Cragan and Wright (1991) make the point that the small group situation is both prevelant and critical in the business world. Further, Cragan and Wright (1991) as well as such other small group researchers such as Hirokawa (1988), Gouran (1988), Bormann (1975), make the point that there is some relatively unique communication taking place in the small group situation.

Therefore, it would seem appropriate to examine the listening needs experienced by people who have and do engage regularly in small group communication situations. The listening needs should be assessed. Such questions as "What is the most frequently occuring listening problem?" need to be asked. Once needs are assertained, those needs might be compared with needs which have been identified for all listeners in all situations. Some of the substantial body of knowledge on how to improve listening generally can be adapted to developing a specific body of suggestions for improving listening in the small group communication situation. Such a needs assessment and suggestions would be valuable to those working in and with businesses and organizations seeking to enhance the functional communication of such groups. This paper reports a study designed to make a needs assessment. In addition. this paper will complete the second part of the task by offering a set of suggestions for improving listening in the small group situation.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

Subjects selected for the needs analysis were selected because of the liklihood they would have occassion to be involved frequently with small group situations in organizational environments. Four kinds of university classes were selected to provide subjects for the needs analysis.

-Graduate students in communication in a seminar in training and development. Many of the subjects were part time graduate students who worked for various organizations.

-Senior level students in organizational communication classes. Most had studied small group processes and had some experience-work, internship, etc.- with small group situations.

-Undergraduate communication course offered through extension to students in the Adult Re-entry Program. Nearly all of these worked full time and were returning to complete a degree. Many were completing a degree in Speech Communication.

-An undergraduate Honors class in COM 110:Introduction to Speech Communication. Most were not majoring in any communication degree; but, as is true of most Honors classes, they were involved in campus and community groups.

A total of 137 subjects completed a short questionnaire which asked two questions. Question one was, "Of those instances when someone was difficult to listen to, describe what MADE IT MOST DIFFICULT for you to listen to the person(s)." Question Two was, "Of those instances when people were difficult to listen to, describe what was the most FREQUENTLY OCCURRING REASON why it seemed difficult to listen to the person(s). The second question was the primary point of focus for this study.

Responses were analyzed using content analysis method. Determining an appropriate category set was a problem. This problem was resolved by using a subset sample of subject responses drawn by stratified random method. Responses to the second question by each individual in the subset of 27

were listed. That list suggested an apparent category system as follows:

-Treatment of Receiver
-Subject Related
-Individual Attitude
-Individual Knowledge
-Message
-Delivery

During the content analysis of the 137 subjects it became obvious that there existed a viable seventh category not captured by the reading of the subset. Therefore, "self" was added as a seventh category for content analysis.

The results of the content analysis revealed the following frequencies for the seven categories:

Treatment fo Receivers	13
Subject Related	6
Individual Attitude	23
Individual Knowledge	11
Message	36
Delivery	32
Self	10

Clearly, three categories reflected high level of need for effective listening as viewed or perceived by subjects.

The feature about speaking and listening in a group situation which makes the situation so unique is the building of a collective climate. That means that lsitening behavior must be more than self oriented. It must also be other oriented when the other is not one or two other individuals but rather a collective other which is greater than the sum of the individuals in the situation.

SUGGESTIONS

This section is intended to provide suggestions which those working in training and development or communication consulting might focus on as ways to improve listening in the organizational environment. The suggestions are drawn from a wide body of listening research and practical experience. The special circumstances of the small group environment is recognized when the suggestions are described.

The most frequently listed problem category in the study reported here was with the message. Specifically, ninteen subjects listed "rambling" as the most serious

problem for the listener to deal with in the small group environment. The most obvious suggestion is for the listener to ask a question or series of questions which brings the speaker back to a main line of thought or explanation. However, since this is a group interacting with different interests and concerns by different members, the speaker may be doing the correct thing by exploring tangents which might seem like "rambling." Therefore, a second suggestion is that it might be better in some instances to metacommunicate about what the group wants or needs to know. That might involve focusing on what other members of the group might have said previously or how they appear to be listening to the message as it is being presented. After processing what the group members have said both verbally and nonverbally, then it may be appropriate to suggest or ask what it is the group needs to focus on. In other words, it may be more helpful to use the "spare time" to metalisten. That can be done by utilizing the leadership behaviors of synthsizing. The third suggestion is to accept the fact of "rambling" messages by people in the group who are speaking and meet the challange by actively and creatively listening. Actively searching for related information and ideas may provide a suprising perspective, perhaps even a creative perspective to the messages that are being presented by the "ramblers." If so, and since this is a small group sistuation, using small group preocesses will enable the listener to introduce the new interesting or creative perspective. For those preparing training material, they might develop a module called "listening to rambler in the group."

The second most frequently listed problem category was delivery of the message. In this category, two specific items were identified most frequently: overall delivery; and monotone speed of speaking. There are several suggestions for trainers and consultants who wish to focus on listening in the small group situation. Suggest to the listener that they have two opportunities. First, accept the delivery flaws and focus on the message. That is a suggested listening practice in all situations. It applies equally in the small group situation. Second, treat this as an opportunity. Consider playing what Cragan and Wright call a "questioning role" which they say is never played enough in a small group (p. 149). They point out that "The two task functions that the questioner perform are seeking ideas and seeking idea evaluation, The procedural function that the questioner most often performs is clarification" (p. 149). In other words, take the lead in helping the group as a whole focus on the issue or substance of the communication and not on the delivery characteristics of whoever is speaking. One of the dimensions of group talk is task. It is both a leadership role and a participant role to listen from a task dimension, essentially ignoring delivery.

The third most frequently listed problem category was individual's attitude. By that, subjects meant that there was something expressed by the speaker in a group which revealed a negative or non group oriented attitude. There are several suggestions for trainers and consultants who wish to focus on listening in the small group situation. Perhaps there are some questions the listener might ask which will help the negative attitude person focus on group needs. For example, Cragan and Wright describe a leadership behavior in the interpersonal dimension as "instigating group self-analysis" and "climate making" (p.135). Strategic questions about the group's collective goal or need might lead to a positive analysis or climate; thereby, helping a negative attitude person refocus their attitude. In terms of their own behavior, a listener might use free think time to explore ways to ask the negative attitude person why they feel so negative. Such a question might be productive in opening up some group process issue, perhaps a hidden agenda, which needs to be explored. Nichols always talked about positive use of free think time which resulted from the differental between speaking speed and thinking or listening speed.

Finally, there are two overall concluding observations. First, it is encouraging to observe that the nature of listening problems in a small group situation are only somewhat different and unique from listening problems generally. What is somewhat different is that suggestions need to take into account the fact that there is a group dynamic at work in the minds of all persons as they listen and there is a group dynamic at work as people speak in the small group situation.

Second, there is a fundamental responsibility of all members of a small group to listen attentively and to explain their positions. This is a general pervasive attitude required of each participatory member. It is a responsibility to the group as a collective body. As a listening participant in the group a person can work to change what it is possible to change and accept what can not be changed. With that thought in mind, the specific suggestions listed above would make the speaking/listening interaction in a small group situation more functional.

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